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WORLD WAR II IN THE ALEUTIANS:  
THE FUNDAMENTALS OF JOINT CAMPAIGNS

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by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

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THE FUNDAMENTALS OF JOINT CAMPAIGNS

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contained in Joint Pub 1, Joint Warfare of the U.S. Armed Forces.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The nature of modern warfare continues to demonstrate that the United States military must fight future conflicts in a joint service environment. Yet despite the many obvious lessons of recent history, it was not until 1986 with the Congressionally mandated Defense Reorganization Act did the military services begin to institutionalize the concepts of joint warfare. With the publication of Joint Pub 1, Joint Warfare of the U.S. Armed Forces in 1991, the joint campaign was finally recognized as the unifying focus for the conduct of warfare.

The earliest campaign U.S. Armed Forces fought that remotely resembled a "modern" joint effort occurred at the start of World War II in the North Pacific. Although a largely forgotten theater of war, the campaign for the Aleutians was the first effort by the United States to employ what Joint Pub 1 recognizes as a joint campaign. Yet the critical lessons learned in the Aleutians were largely ignored only to be repeated by operational commanders throughout the various theaters of World War II. These failures to learn from early efforts at joint warfighting would not only influence the

conduct of future efforts in the Pacific, but they would have a large influence in how U.S. forces conducted business until the mandated defense reorganization act of 1986. A review of the Aleutian Campaign validates the need for today's operational commanders to adhere to the fundamentals of joint warfighting by developing a campaign plan that provides for unity of command and synchronization of forces.

#### Japanese Naval Operations in the North Pacific.

Before an analysis of the Aleutian Campaign can begin, an understanding of Japanese strategy in the North Pacific is necessary. What brought the Japanese to the North Pacific?

Following its successful attack at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese High Command in 1942 planned to extend its eastern perimeter from the Aleutians in the North Pacific, through Midway Island in the Central Pacific down to the Solomons in the Southwest Pacific.<sup>1</sup> The trigger operation for the movement into the Aleutians was built around Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's plan to seize and garrison Midway Island. As Commander of the Combined Imperial Fleet, Yamamoto planned to draw the surviving element of the United States Fleet into a decisive battle when the American fleet counterattacked the occupation of Midway. Once a decisive battle was won, Yamamoto felt Japan could

negotiate a peace settlement that would allow it to keep its conquests.<sup>2</sup>

In a complex operation, Yamamoto organized a two pronged drive against Midway and the Aleutian Islands. Yamamoto's Fifth Fleet, under the command of Vice Admiral Boshiro Hosogaya, was to strike in the North Pacific with two purposes. First, he was to conduct a deception operation to draw the U.S. Fleet out of Hawaii. Once Midway was secured, Hosogaya was to occupy Kiska and Attu Islands in the Western Aleutians for use as patrol bases for flights that would range the North Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

Vice Admiral Hosogaya, in turn, split his fleet into two task forces. A naval task force, built around two aircraft carriers had the mission of destroying shipping, planes and shore installations at the U.S. bases at Dutch Harbor and Adak. The second force, the Adak-Kiska-Attu Occupation Force, was to land and destroy U.S. installations at Adak and then reposition to occupy Kiska and Attu.<sup>4</sup> By destroying U.S. bases in the Western Aleutians, the Japanese hoped to prevent the Americans from launching an offensive against Japan from the North Pacific and to obstruct military collaboration between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup>



The Aleutian Operation, scheduled to start one day earlier than the Midway Operation, was designed to draw the attention of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz (CINCPAC). Unfortunately for the Japanese, U.S. codebreakers had deciphered enough of Yamamoto's plans to assure Nimitz that the Japanese main objective was Midway.<sup>6</sup>

Commencing on 3 June 1942, Admiral Hosogaya commenced his attack at Dutch Harbor with air strikes that continued through 4 June, inflicting minor damage to the bases. Having felt that his initial mission was complete, Hosogaya redirected his fleet to the Western Aleutians to occupy the Islands of Kiska and Attu.

In the meantime, the Battle of Midway ended with Yamamoto retiring with staggering losses and without achieving any of his objectives. Yet the supporting operation to secure a foothold in the Aleutians was a success and as such he decided to salvage whatever advantage he could accrue from the small victory in the Aleutians. Maintaining their presence in the Aleutians served two purposes for the Japanese High Command. First, by claiming a "decisive victory" in the Aleutians, the Japanese intended to mask the disaster at Midway by claiming Midway was a supporting "diversion."<sup>7</sup> Maintaining troops on the island would serve a propaganda purpose. Secondly,

strongholds in the Aleutians would protect Japan's northern perimeter, thus protecting the homeland. Although the Doolittle raid in the preceding April did little physical damage in Japan, its psychological impact was significant. The Japanese High Command was convinced that the raid originated in the Aleutians and they were obsessed with the need to protect the homelands from similar raids.<sup>8</sup> So it was decided that the Japanese would maintain its Aleutian garrisons. Throughout the remainder of the Aleutian Campaign, the Japanese would make concerted efforts to reinforce its garrisons.

#### The U.S. Strategic Environment.

According to Joint Pub 1, a fundamental characteristic of a joint campaign is that it should support national strategic goals and is "heavily influenced" by National Military Strategy.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. strategy developed for the Aleutians was a function of two factors. The Aleutian strategy had its basis in pre-war plans and in the geography of Alaska as it related to the security of the Soviet Union.

Pre-war plans laid the groundwork for the initial strategy employed in the opening months of World War II. As early as 1938, the war planners of the Joint Board developed a series of war plans to counter the growing threats posed by Germany,

Italy and Japan. The five plans, collectively known as the "Rainbow Plans," were designed to defend the United States and the western hemisphere from Axis aggression.<sup>10</sup> Specifically Rainbow 5 assumed the United States would support an early projection of forces to either or both the European and African continents. Rainbow 5 envisioned that a strategic defense would be maintained in the Pacific until success against Axis allowed the transfer of significant forces to the Pacific.

As the situation in Western Europe deteriorated during the winter of 1940-1941, American and British planners met at the ABC-1 Conference and decided on a joint position calling for the defeat of Germany first. Action against Japan would be constrained to a strategic defense.<sup>11</sup> Because Rainbow 5 closely resembled the position adopted at the ABC-1 Conference, President Roosevelt approved the plan and construction of required defensive measures accelerated (airfields, naval bases and support facilities). Under the "Joint Pacific Coastal Frontier Defense Plan, Rainbow 5," the joint services had the initial mission of denying the Japanese the use of air, land and sea bases in Alaska and the Aleutians.<sup>12</sup>

The second basis for U.S. strategy in the Aleutians was the need to insure the continued security of the Soviet Union. In 1942, the Soviets were fighting a desperate war against

Germany and could little afford a two front war. Although U.S. planners desired the development of Soviet air bases in Siberia for use against Japan, Stalin made it clear that the Soviets would not provoke the Japanese until success against Japan was assured.<sup>13</sup> Finally, lend-lease shipments to Siberia were threatened by a possible Japanese occupation of Dutch Harbor (in the Aleutians) and Nome, Alaska. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) concluded that the Japanese must be prevented from isolating Alaska from Siberia.<sup>14</sup> But until greater resources became available, the United States was to maintain a strategic defense to secure its tenuous links to the Soviet Union.

This was the strategic setting that U.S. commanders had to contend with as they developed their first joint service campaign against the Japanese. The implied mission from this strategic setting required commanders to develop a campaign that would secure the lines of communication to the Soviet Union while simultaneously defending the territorial integrity of the United States.

## CHAPTER II

### UNITY OF COMMAND IN THE ALEUTIAN CAMPAIGN

*Nothing is more important than unity in command --  
Napoleon, Maxims.<sup>1</sup>*

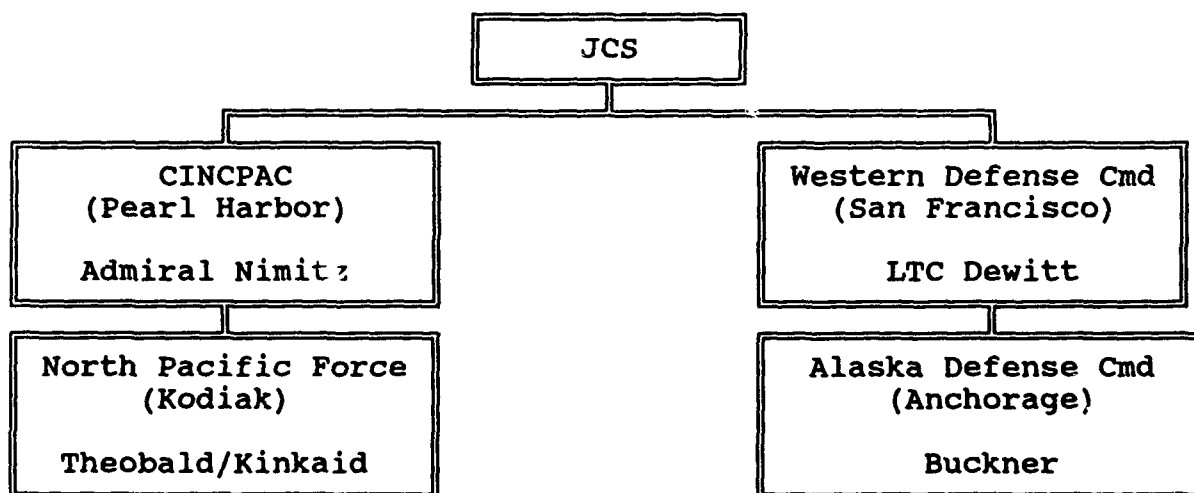
Even the most superficial analysis of the Aleutian Campaign reveals its most glaring deficiency; the failure to achieve unity of command throughout the fourteen month campaign. Amazingly enough, a theater commander for the Aleutians was never appointed. This glaring deficiency would manifest itself in persistent interservice bickering, poor command and control and a lack of unity of effort as major operations were conducted. That the United States would never solve its unity of command problems in the Pacific Theater in World War II can be traced to its failure to derive the key operational lessons learned from initial joint service warfighting in the Aleutians.

How is it then, that such a basic fundamental of campaign design be overlooked? The answer to this question lies in the relationships of the services prior to the outbreak of the war.

Following the Spanish-American War in 1898, "mutual cooperation" among the services was the best doctrinal

accommodation achieved until 1935.<sup>2</sup> In that year, the Joint Board (predecessors to the JCS) approved a revised edition of the Joint Action of the Army and Navy which established the pattern by which unity of command passed from the President through the JCS to the theater commander.<sup>3</sup> Although this new doctrine allowed one man the authority to join elements of all services into a task force, assign missions and objectives, it failed to allow this individual to infringe upon the administrative and disciplinary functions of component services. Additionally, the theater commander was prohibited from directing how a component commander was to carry out his mission.<sup>4</sup> These prohibitions would lead to serious misunderstandings in service relationships as the Army and Navy attempted their first joint efforts in the Aleutians.

The following diagram outlines the command relationships for the Aleutian Campaign.



Looking at the diagram, it is apparent that the "theater commander" took the form of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. When the campaign in the Aleutians began in May 1942 with the Japanese bombing of Dutch Harbor, the Pacific War had been divided into two theaters. Despite the obvious desire to have a single theater commander subordinate to the JCS, the inability of the Navy to accept the idea of subordinating fleet activities to General MacArthur led to the establishment of two theaters of war in the Pacific.<sup>5</sup> Admiral Chester W. Nimitz was designated Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Area and therefore provided the authority to "exercise direct command of the combined armed forces in the North and Central Pacific Areas."<sup>6</sup> Nimitz chose to exercise this authority by establishing the North Pacific Force initially commanded by Rear Admiral Robert A. Theobald. Theobald was to counter the Japanese Midway deception plan at Dutch Harbor and oppose the occupation of islands in the Western Aleutians.

Unfortunately, Nimitz's command structure directly clashed with the pre-existing Western Defense Command, commanded by LTG John L. Dewitt. Alaska, as part of the Western Defense Command, became a designated theater of operations on 11 December 1941, although with the restriction that LTG Dewitt could not move major ground or air units without the consent of

the JCS.<sup>7</sup> Subordinate to Western Defense Command in the theater was MG Simon B. Buckner's Alaska Defense Command, activated in February 1941.<sup>8</sup>

When Admiral Theobald arrived in theater with his task force, his situation was complicated by the fact that the vast majority of available ground troops (30,000) belonged to MG Buckner. In addition, the Eleventh Air Force was subordinate to Western Defense Command. All told, the Army "owned" 51,000 soldiers, by far the largest service representation in theater.<sup>9</sup>

Immediately Theobald asked for a clarification of command relationships in the North Pacific following a clash with MG Buckner over the control of the Eleventh Air Force. Nimitz replied: "The command relationship between . . . Alaska Defense Command under General Buckner and the North Pacific Force is to be by mutual cooperation."<sup>10</sup>

Without a clearly defined chain of command to develop and execute a campaign plan, joint warfighting in the North Pacific became a function of how well these two strong-willed personalities could get along with one another.

Unfortunately, both Theobald and Buckner held intense dislike for one another. Both held strongly differing opinions as to campaign objectives and the employment of ground and air



forces. For the first six months of the Aleutian Campaign, an acrimonious relationship was the defining characteristic of our joint warfighting efforts. Relations were so bad that Theobald repeatedly asked to be relieved and given a new assignment. He finally got his wish with the arrival of Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid in January 1942.<sup>11</sup>

Admiral Nimitz's failure to press for a unified command would eventually add to the cost of the Aleutian Campaign in terms of time, effort and even lives. Although the situation would improve due to better relations between Kinkaid and Buckner, the lack of unified command would have significant implications for the development of a coherent campaign plan for the Aleutians.

#### Fundamentals of Campaign Planning.

As defined in Joint Pub 1, campaigns "represent the art of linking battles and engagements in an operational design to accomplish strategic objectives."<sup>12</sup> It emphasizes that a single joint commander has the responsibility to employ American military power in a campaign designed to support national goals and objectives.

Without a single theater commander, the individual services were left to define their own missions based on their

understanding of the strategic setting they found themselves in. It is interesting to note that although the Joint Chiefs of Staff could have acted as the de facto theater commander, at no time did the JCS issue an order outlining the ultimate aim of the Aleutian Campaign. It was left to the component commanders to find a way through their many disagreements to achieve some semblance of unity of effort.

How then did the campaign develop? A study of the Aleutian Campaign reveals that component commanders devised their own concept of the operation and then forwarded the proposal through their respective service chiefs who in turn submitted the proposal to the Joint Board.\* When the military planners in Washington agreed with the plan, the plan was submitted to the participating services for concurrence. In other words, obtaining a consensus was the means for developing a campaign plan. It was not the product of a theater commander's concept which should have "provided the intellectual core of the campaign plan," presenting a "broad vision of the required aim or end state and how operations will be sequenced and synchronized. . ."<sup>13</sup>

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\* The Joint Board was the predecessor to the JCS. It consisted of the Service Chiefs and their deputies along with the Chiefs of each service's War Plans Division. Its purpose was to coordinate Army and Navy planning (Morton, p.123).

As an example, the initial "phase" of the Aleutian Campaign followed the bombing of Dutch Harbor and the occupation by the Japanese of Kiska and the Attu Islands. The first major operation was proposed by LTG Dewitt on 18 July 1942. Western Defense Command, supported by MG Buckner's Alaska Defense Command, proposed seizing the island of Tanaga to establish an air base capable of neutralizing the Japanese garrison at Kiska, 160 miles distant. This plan was approved by General George C. Marshall, Army Chief of Staff and the Joint Board. But prior to a joint directive being issued ordering LTG Dewitt and RADM Theobald to execute the plan, Theobald rejected the proposal recommending instead a landing at Adak where the harbor was more hospitable to his fleet. The Navy requested that a final decision on this operation be deferred until it could conduct a thorough reconnaissance of both Adak and Tanaga. Upon completion of the reconnaissance, Theobald reported directly to Admiral Ernest J. King, (Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet) who immediately backed his subordinate's claim that Tanaga was not acceptable for naval operations. This dispute between field commanders (Theobald and Buckner) required that a compromise be reached in Washington, D.C. In order to obtain naval support for the operation, Army planners conceded Tanaga as an objective and

settled for Adak. With the provision that Tanaga could be taken at a later date, General Marshall informed Dewitt of the change in the objective and within two weeks Army engineers landed on Adak to prepare a runway for air operations against Kiska and Attu.<sup>14</sup> The need to reach a consensus concerning objectives cost the U.S. effort in the Aleutians approximately one month allowing the Japanese to consolidate their positions. Despite the consensus, the services were no closer to designing a comprehensive campaign to secure the Western Aleutians. The lack of a unified commander capable of exercising authority and direction of theater forces would continue to hinder prospects for an early conclusion to the campaign.

#### Synchronization in the Aleutian Campaign.

Following the seizure of Adak in September 1942, both the Army and the Navy settled into a strategy of attrition with the Japanese while they waited for the JCS to find the resources to support an amphibious assault of Kiska and Attu, tentatively scheduled in the spring of 1943. This delay from September to the early spring was the result of two factors. The campaign for the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific had a higher priority for troops, naval support and virtually all classes of supply. Secondly, the notoriously poor weather conditions

along the Aleutian chain would preclude any major offensive action during the fall and winter months. Knowing that they would receive little support from outside the Aleutian theater, U.S. commanders assessed the risks associated with a winter campaign and decided to maintain pressure on the Japanese garrisons. Yet when faced with the prospect of fighting a campaign with limited resources in bad weather, commanders in the North Pacific failed to synchronize their operations to gain the greatest advantage with the meager resources at their disposal.

According to Joint Pub 1, a campaign should be designed to achieve the synchronized and sequenced employment of all land sea and air forces.<sup>15</sup> More specifically, the Army defines synchronization as "the ability to focus resources and activities in time and space to produce maximum relative combat power at the decisive point."<sup>16</sup> A classic example of a joint service failure to synchronize forces occurred during the Aleutian Campaign at the Battle of Komandorski Islands, one of the few great "fleet actions" involving the U.S. Navy in the twentieth century.

Having replaced Theobald in January 1943, RADM Kinkaid took more aggressive measures to evict the Japanese from the Aleutians. Understanding that the "center of gravity" for the

isolated Japanese garrisons on Attu and Kiska was their overextended sea line of communication, Kinkaid sought to establish a blockade of the islands to prevent their resupply. To enforce a blockade, Kinkaid had at his disposal a naval task force commanded by Rear Admiral Charles McMorris.

One of the most significant "joint" decisions of the Aleutian Campaign was made by the JCS in May 1942, just prior to the Japanese attack at Midway. The JCS decided to place all Army and Navy air units in Alaska under the command of the Army's BG William C. Butler, who in turn was placed under the command of the Navy's North Pacific Force.<sup>17</sup> This muddled command relationship would impact events at the Battle of Komandorski's.

On 26 March 1943, the naval task group commanded by McMorris intercepted a strong Japanese naval force at the Komandorski Islands attempting to reinforce Kiska and Attu. When McMorris reported the contact to Kinkaid, bombers of the Eleventh Air Force were loaded with anti-personnel ordnance for an attack on Kiska. Because of the delay caused by the need to change to armor piercing bombs, the Eleventh Air Force was unable to support McMorris's task force before the Japanese fleet retired.<sup>18</sup> Although McMorris fought a brilliant battle against a force twice the size of his own, he failed to inflict

significant damage to the Japanese fleet. Had McMorris had the support of Army bombers, he may have been able to turn the engagements into an unmistakable disaster for the Japanese.

This is a classic case of a commander (Kinkaid) failing to synchronize his forces. Even though the 11th Air Force was subordinate to his headquarters, it was conducting air operations independent of the naval task group. Unlike today's Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) BG Butler was not integrating his operations to support Kinkaid's. Had Kinkaid and Butler understood and used a JFACC-like concept, then in all likelihood Butler's bombers would have been somewhat better oriented on the Japanese' center of gravity instead of conducting uncoordinated bombing attacks on Kiska. Had an effort been made to integrate and synchronize air assets with the naval task force, the Battle of Komandorski's may have had strategic implications if the Japanese Northern Fleet was destroyed. A decisive battle at the Komandorskis may have forced the Japanese to withdraw all remaining forces from the North Pacific.

#### Concluding the Campaign.

Once the Japanese Fleet was driven from Aleutian waters at the Battle of Komandorski's, the Aleutian Campaign moved into

its third and final phase of operations. Joint planning for the occupation of Kiska and Attu had begun in December 1942 with an Army-Navy staff established in San Diego under the command of RADM Francis W. Rockwell.<sup>19</sup> A shortage of shipping required the task force to shift its attention to Attu where the smaller Japanese garrison would require a smaller landing force. Although Rockwell's invasion force landed without opposition on 11 May 1943, it quickly became bogged down due to stubborn Japanese resistance and poor weather conditions. Expected to last three days, the effort to retake Attu took two weeks in which the eventual cost of taking the island was second only to Iwo Jima in World War II; for every hundred enemies on the island, seventy one Americans died.<sup>20</sup>

The operation on Attu was the climax for the Aleutian Campaign for during the two month long preparation for the follow on assault at Kiska, the Japanese conducted a daring evacuation of the 5200 man garrison on 28 July.<sup>21</sup> On 15 August 1943, elements of RADM Rockwell's invasion force of 29,000 men landed on Kiska to find it deserted.

Without a unified commander, the forces in theater were left without a sense of direction following the embarrassment at Kiska. The component commanders were left to decide for themselves what contribution Alaska and the Aleutians could



make towards the defeat of Japan. As had been typical of his role throughout the campaign, LTG Dewitt proposed using forces stationed in the North Pacific for an offensive to Japan's northernmost islands in the Kuriles, but this plan was rejected by the JCS as impractical.<sup>22</sup> For the remainder of the war, the force structure in the Aleutians was gradually reduced to support Nimitz's and MacArthur's two pronged efforts in the Central and South Pacific.

#### **Conclusion: A Current Perspective.**

The relevance of the Aleutian Campaign is that it once again illustrates to the operational planner the advantages provided by attaining unity of command and synchronization of forces in the execution of a campaign plan. It also serves as a stark reminder that joint efforts must be fought in the context of a campaign that provides the unifying focus for joint action.

Although unity of command is almost universally accepted as a guiding principle in command relationships, it is more often than not difficult to achieve. The operational planner must understand that strong personalities and parochialism will overrule what common sense dictates as the most clearly defined chain of command. Even though the doctrine for joint command

relationships was spelled out in 1935, it was not until the Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 did civilian leadership mandate to the military a clearer chain of command. Even professional, intelligent men as Nimitz, King, Marshall, and Dewitt who surely understood joint relationships as spelled out in 1935, failed to keep personal biases from diluting the chain of command. Today's operational planner must remain cognizant that the primary emphasis "should be to keep the chain of command short and simple so that it is clear who is in charge of what."<sup>23</sup>

The Aleutian Campaign is also a study in failed opportunities to synchronize forces. Although only one instance at the Komandorski Islands was reviewed, each service missed opportunities to take full advantage of other service capabilities. In today's resource constrained environment, synchronization will take on a greater importance in campaign design. As force structure is gradually reduced, unified commanders no longer have the luxury of depending on individual service assets to gain objectives. Unlike the commanders who participated in the Aleutian Campaign, today's commanders cannot fail to employ elements of all service components at decisive points in campaigns where the total military impact is greater than the sum of component contributions.

With theater commanders failing to achieve unity of command and a synchronization of forces, how then did the Aleutian Campaign produce America's first theater wide victory against the Japanese? The answer lies in the concept of unity of effort. Despite all of the interservice rivalries, each service directed their efforts to the achievement of a common aim. Although the JCS never clearly articulated the desired end state for the Aleutian Campaign, the service commanders intuitively understood the ultimate aim of the campaign: the removal of Japanese soldiers from American soil. Therefore, success of the Aleutian Campaign is attributable to the sum of each service's efforts to attain a common goal.

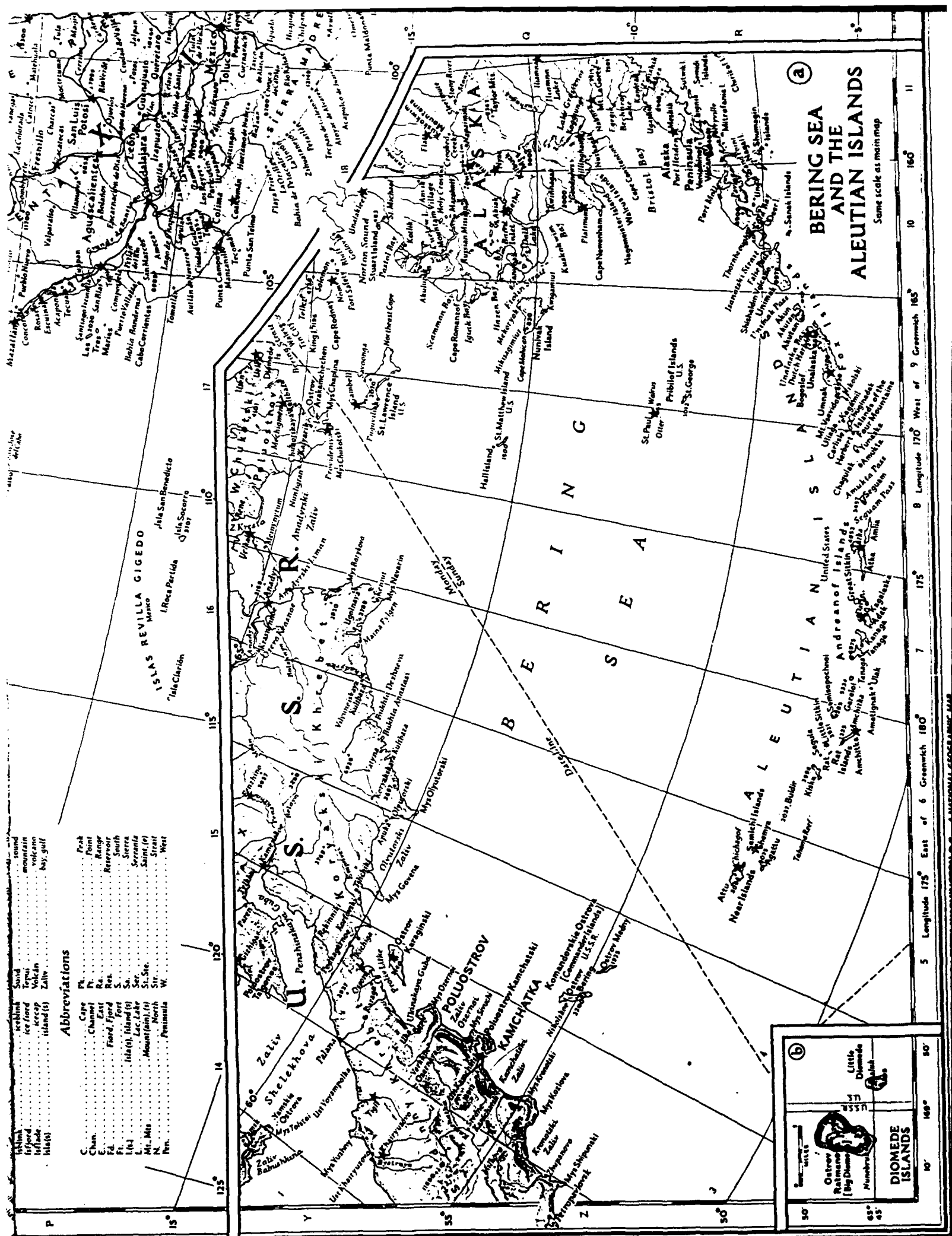
Finally, although the Aleutian Campaign provided the United States with its first theater-side victory of World War II; it did so at a significant cost. The failure of commanders to attain unity of command and synchronization of forces resulted in a campaign that took an unconscionably long time (14 months) and took a disproportionate number of casualties to evict a small Japanese garrison of 5600 soldiers. If for no other reason, the Aleutian Campaign should continue to be of interest to campaign planners as an example of how not to conduct a joint campaign.

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

(George Santaya, American Philosopher)

**APPENDIX I**

**MAP - THE ALEUTIAN CAMPAIGN**



## NOTES

### Chapter I

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2. Dan van der Vat. The Pacific Campaign, The U.S. - Japanese Naval War 1941-1945, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp.177-178.

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4. Stetson Conn, et al., The United States in World War II, The Western Hemisphere, Guarding the United States and Its Outposts, Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1964, p.259.

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7. Brian Garfield. The Thousand Mile War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians, (New York, Doubleday and Company, 1969), pp.94-95.

8. Johnson, p.21.

9. Joint Pub 1, Joint Warfare of the United States. Department of Defense, Washington, DC, 11 November 1991, p.46.

10. Summarized from Johnson, p.26.

11. Johnson, p.28.

12. Johnson, p.29.

13. Grace P. Hayes. The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in World War II, (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1982), p.131.

14. Johnson, p.24.

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1. Louis Morton, The United States in World War II, Strategy and Command: The First Two Years. Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1962, p.352.

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15. Joint Pub 1, p.47.
16. Field Manual 100-5, Operations, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 14 June 1993, p.2-8.
17. Conn, p.260.
18. Summarized from Conn, p.278.
19. Summarized from Conn, p.277.
20. Conn, p.295.
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